

FORMULATING A RESEARCH QUESTION

Goal: **Exercise 11** will lead students through the process of mentally and visually broadening, narrowing, and restricting the topic ideas that they began to develop during concept mapping. The exercise introduces the concept of Boolean searching and the idea that synonyms and closely related terms can help uncover more ideas on the topic.

Description: In this exercise, students analyze the topic idea created with the concept map and narrow or focus their topic to create a specific research question.

Tips for conducting the exercise: The instructor should provide a guide for students to use as an example to follow. It is also advisable to illustrate how to analyze a topic idea by using a smart board, white board, or chalkboard before the students do their own. Walk them through one or two of the example questions to get them started. As they work, walk around the room asking leading questions to push their ideas forward.

This exercise addresses ACRL Standard 1, Part 1; Standard 3, Part 3; and Standard 4, Part 1.

KEYWORDS AND SEARCH TERMS

Once the research question is constructed, it will be necessary to consider the use of key words and controlled vocabulary. Students frequently do not understand the difference between the two. They may not know how to use those differences to their best advantage. They may not understand that the makers of those search aids commonly used in libraries—indexes, databases, Library of Congress, and so on—do not always apply the same rules or select the same terms.

In using key words, it is possible to use more than one word for the same concept. Students must think about synonyms for their key words. Does the on-line catalog in the library use the term “date rape” or does it use “acquaintance rape”? Does the database automatically link related terms or does it simply return zero results when a specific word or phrase is not found? Is the subject one that might be written about by people of many different cultures, languages, and social backgrounds? If so, such knowledge can be useful in the identification of synonyms that can be valuable to the researcher.

EXERCISE 11

Creating a Research Question

The table below illustrates how a research question develops from a broad topic to a focused question. Follow the four examples down the columns to see how the questions develop. Then use the blank form provided below to develop your own research question.

Broad Topic	Pollution	Commercial fishing	Marketing	Nutrition
Restricted Topic	Acid rain	Fishing and regulations	Nike and marketing	Diets and nutritional benefits
Narrowed Topic	Acid rain in the United States	Fishing regulations and New England	Nike and international marketing	Vegetarianism
Research Question	What can the United States do to prevent acid rain?	What impact do fishing regulations have on commercial fishing in New England?	What are Nike's business practices in international sales?	What nutritional benefits are there to vegetarianism?

Now try out your topic idea below. It is useful to work out several variations of the topic idea to see how it could change slightly and be improved or amended.

Broad Topic				
Restricted Topic				
Narrowed Topic				
Research Question				